

The Politics of Pity versus Piety: The Poetics and Politics Behind Different Feminist Accounts on the Muslim Woman

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Keywords

Essentialism, postmodernism, intersectionality, Malala, Muslim women

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Cover Page Footnote

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This article analyzes two books that utilize the construct of “The Muslim Woman” as a symbol for public consumption across a global and conceptual scale: Saba Mahmood’s book, 'Politics of Piety', and Malala Yousafzai’s and Christina Lamb’s 'I am Malala'. The motivation behind the analysis is to situate the texts within debates on essentialism within accounts of Muslim women. While essentialism and the critique of it in such discussions are not a novelty, the books demonstrate a physical manifestation of essentialism and a reductionist reaction toward this brand of essentialism. Through analysis of the content, poetics, and response toward the books, this paper argues that scholarship surrounding Muslim women are still mired in essentialism albeit efforts to avoid it due to a lack in direction as to how to resolve the issue. This paper suggests using a combination of power convolution and intersectionality of identities to capture the representation of Muslim women.

Keywords: Malala, Saba Mahmood, Muslim woman, intersectionality, essentialism

1. Introduction

Discussion about ‘the Muslim woman’ or ‘the Middle Eastern woman’ in mainstream media is often accompanied by images that are limited to a few tropes or stereotypes: The oppressed woman. The veiled woman. The woman that is not free. The woman dominated by her men. The woman governed by a patriarchal religion (Abu-Lughod 2013; Khoja-Moolji 2015). Such images, while ubiquitous for a long time in the West, have gained increased visibility and persistence following 9/11 (Mahmood 2004). Khoja-Moolji (2015) expanded upon this by illustrating how some women in the United States have started campaigns surrounding the plight of Afghan women being oppressed by fundamentalist Taliban, women who are represented in the mainstream media as being completely covered in their burqas, women who are not able to get an education, or even be afforded the luxury of being vain, so much so that George W. Bush’s administration used the stereotype as part of the ethical rationalization and a way to win support for the military intervention of Afghanistan.

In this paper, I would like to argue for a hybrid framework for viewing the experience of Muslim women, to see it as more than just black and white, more than just liberated or not liberated, but to embrace the richness of ethnography and to recognize that they are a beautiful complexity of both. To do so, I argue for a recognition and explicit presentation of a continuum of relations intersecting with

intersectionality as conceived by Crenshaw (1989) within literatures, both public and academic.

The body of the Muslim Woman and the gendered intimacies of her life has been used by many Western parties to bolster different political or theoretical agendas on a global platform (Abu-Lughod 2002). In this article, I will analyze two such works that utilize the construct of “The Muslim Woman” as a symbol for public consumption across a global and conceptual scale: Saba Mahmood’s book — *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* and Malala Yousafzai’s and Christina Lamb’s *I am Malala*.

I looked at representation of Muslim women in Mahmood (2004) and Yousafzai & Lamb (2013) also with the aim of situating the texts within debates on essentialism within the ethnographies of Muslim women. Essentialism within the field is not a novelty (refer to ‘Discussion: An intersectional voice). This happens either in reaction to books that are not even critiquing Islam’s effects on women rights, or through a reactionary stance from academia and activists alike. Critiques on essentialism have also been ongoing (Phillips 2010; Wassef 2011; Elham 2016). Through analyzing the reaction and content of the two books chosen, we see a physical manifestation of both an essentialist reaction (in reference to Malala’s narrative) as well as an example of a reactionary approach toward this brand of essentialism. The two spheres, examples of politic of pity versus politic of piety, serve to illustrate a concrete example of the physical manifestation of research and written lived experiences that may have fallen to the easy mark of essentialism. While this has been a perennial discussion in the topic of women in Islam of late, we have yet to see case studies of published books that reach significant masses.

The purposes behind choosing these two selections out of a vast scholarly feminist literature is their disparate genres: one is academic, and the other is meant for public consumption. In making this selection, I am inspired by a generous reading of Margery Wolf’s (1992) *Thrice Told Tale*. In her book, she has three different written versions of a woman in Peihotien, Taiwan in 1960 that was battling the image of being seen as someone that was mentally ill, lost her spirit, possessed, or possess the potential to be a Shaman. The event was portrayed in three different versions: a short story, field notes, and an academic article. While the central idea of the book was to explore the debates surrounding key postmodern texts (such as Clifford & Marcus’s (1986) writing), her analysis accompanying the different writing styles surrounding the same event, have inspired the foundation of this article. The reflections on the different ‘poetics’ she used to present the same event produce very different readings on how the audience interpret or digest the different genre of writing on the same event.

The postmodern turn in anthropology focused heavily on introducing greater reflexivity on the author’s part in their writing. The postmodern anthropology referred here is in reference to the movement in anthropology which paid attention

to the interlocutors opinions and perspectives, cultural relativism, and skepticism toward grand narratives and theories (Geertz 1973; Gardner & Lewis 1996; Spiro 1996; Wolf 1992). It is along this line of thought that I picked two such disparate genres surrounding the topic of “The Muslim Woman”. These two modes of representations are very prominent genres in this discussion and have different audiences as well. If how one writes, is a way one connects to their audience while establishing oneself as the authority on the subject, the explorations of these two books could show a reflection of the popular discourse that consumers of popular books engage in and generate. It also serves as a rhetorical device to caution both public and academic writers against falling into the easy trap of essentialism.

Therefore, I begin with a summary of *I am Malala*, followed by a discussion of the discourse surrounding it in three directions: the general public, a Pakistani audience, and in academic scholarship. Next, I will provide a short summary of the, *Politics of Piety* before moving on to examining Saba Mahmood’s work critically under the lens of “the politics of the global Muslim woman.” For *I am Malala*, I will be analyzing the contents as well as the audience’s general reaction to the sensationalized story. As for *Politics of Piety*, I will be analyzing the author’s writing and motives specifically. This is because as a piece of academic writing, the author is more aware and explicit of her motivation and argument behind the narrative since it is based on careful work of ethnography. Additionally, the audience base is significantly fewer than that of a public memoir such as *I am Malala*. From this analysis, I argue that scholarship about the conveniently labelled ‘Muslim woman’ should be more cognizant of the complex relationships between audiences and writers when representing the rich lived experiences of individuals. Finally, I explore the debates on the stances taken when representing women in Islam’s experiences and respond to the debate with a proposed paradigm of viewing the Muslim Woman.

2. Is it courage in the face of danger? – A Summary of *I am Malala*

I am Malala is a memoir co-written by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb, a veteran British journalist. *I am Malala* chronicles young Malala’s life in Pakistan and her journey towards becoming a voice for girls’ education. The book starts with a description of an idyllic existence in Pakistan’s Swat Valley before the arrival of the Taliban. Most of Malala’s life revolved around her school, which was founded by her father. Her father was a vocal member of the community and an influential public speaker and Malala described his influence on her journey to becoming a voice for girl education on a global stage. However, trouble started when Pakistan’s Taliban threatened Malala’s father to close down the school since, according to them, the school’s values were not aligned with those of Sharia Law. Encouraged by her father, Malala critiqued the militancy and advocated for the right of girls to be

educated by contributing – under a pseudonym – to the media in the form of blogs for BBC Urdu, and later on by giving interviews to various news outlets using her real identity. The fearless Malala had been a girls’ education advocate since the age of eleven. Despite the threat of suicide bombings and the prevalence of mass bombing of schools, Malala continued to attend school amidst the Taliban’s call for girls to stop attending schools. Malala describes how the Taliban took over Pakistan and the government did not do anything substantial to stop the mass killing in the name of Sharia. In one interview, she described the Taliban as people that are “abusing our religion.”

In October 2012, Malala was targeted and shot in the head by a member of the Taliban while she was on her way back from school with her fellow female classmates in the school van. Two of her friends were injured during the gunning, but Malala was seriously injured.

Following the attack on her, the Taliban issued a press release stating they did not target her because she was an advocate for girls’ education, but rather because she was speaking out against the Taliban as stated in this excerpt:

“The Taliban issued a statement assuming responsibility for shooting me but denying it was because of my campaign for education... ‘We [the Taliban] carried out this attack and anybody who speaks against us will be attacked in the same way... Malala has been targeted because of her pioneer role in preaching secularism... She was young but she was promoting Western culture in the Pashtun areas. She was pro-West; she was speaking against the Taliban; she was calling President Obama her idol.” (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 216)

She was initially treated in a Pakistani military hospital but was later flown to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, United Kingdom for better healthcare. Malala survived the attack and is currently living in the United Kingdom. She is also the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize for advocating for the right of all children to education.

2.1 Used? A discussion of *I am Malala*

2.1.1 The women-in-Islam schema

The way in which mainstream media packages Malala makes it easier for a global audience to consume her story within a women-in-Islam schema. For the purpose of this article, ‘women-in-Islam schema’ is a phrase to represent the representation and image of Muslim women being represented by mainstream media, one that is ‘passive’ and ‘oppressed’ (Al-Hejin 2015; Mishra 2007; Roushanzamir 2004). Under this schema is also the image associated with veiling – ‘backwardness’,

‘oppression’, and ‘terrorism’ (Bullock 2002; Bullock and Jafri 2000; Kampmark 2003; Khiabany and Williamson 2008; MacMaster and Lewis 1998).

Within this framework, we can see how easily women’s role in fundamentalist Islam is placed in binary opposition to Western democratic values as described by Said (1978): equality versus inequality; freedom against oppression, participation in opposition to exclusion, and others. The narrative of deliberate exclusion of girls from education is seen to align with these binary chords that are already so entrenched in global public minds, particularly in the West. Therefore, we can see how political and cultural leaders could easily universalize and iconize Malala from within the women-in-Islam schema. While the story of a young Muslim girl being shot by Muslim men is one that is morally shocking globally, it still resides within the expected framework, which in turn makes the story so digestible and easy to iconize. In summary, I argue that Malala helps create relationships based on pity and charitable compassion for the experiences of Muslim girls in general; a way for consumers of the industry of pity and charity to conceive of Muslim girls’ experiences in a generalized and distanced fashion.

Furthermore, the politics of pity is exacerbated by the activation of negative feelings towards those that are the imagined perpetrators of violence against Malala, which is seen as representative of Muslim women and girls in general. Khoja-Moolji (2015) noticed that discussion of the specific gunman who shot Malala is often glossed over in favor of blaming a mass group in newspapers. The feelings of disgust toward the gunman is instead directed to the mass of Muslim men, as well as Islam, the Taliban, Arabs, brown people, Pakistan, Pakistanis, and the Middle East. The result is a mass figure that is imagined as a common threat, a mass figure that embodies the value that “we” do not endorse. It is through understanding this that we can see how general readings of Malala understand and assimilate her within this known framework. In the context of the time-hardened orientalist representation of Muslim men, it does not come as a surprise when The Muslim Man is seen as a feared and hated subject. Therefore, the general global consumer ignores the nuance and complexity that the book provides, as it is overpowered by the more popular understanding of Muslim men.

2.1.2 Beyond the mainstream preconceptions on who is The Muslim Woman

I would like to discuss two different reactions to *I am Malala* that depart from the mainstream women-in-Islam activist schema: opposition from within Pakistan and reviews by academic scholarship.

According to Olesen (2016), there are different stances of opposition to Malala’s story in Pakistan. Some see the attack as a fake one, a concoction by the West and the CIA to denigrate both the Taliban and Pakistan as indicated in this excerpt by Mahmood and Walsh (2013):

“That cynicism was echoed this week across Pakistan, where conspiracy-minded citizens loudly branded Ms. Yousafzai a CIA agent, part of a nebulous Western plot to humiliate their country and pressure their government. Muhammad Asim, a student standing outside the gates of Punjab University in the eastern city of Lahore, dismissed the Taliban attack on Ms. Yousafzai as a made-for-TV drama. ‘How can a girl survive after being shot in the head?’ he asked. ‘It doesn’t make sense.’...”

Indeed, Malala was criticized and condemned by Pakistani commentators to the point where she was nicknamed Malala Drama-zai on different social media sites (Crilly 2013).

Another line of opposition is over the concern and disappointment that the West may have stolen Malala and appropriated her for a Western political-cultural framework and political intentions. However, a more general theme shared, by not only within Pakistan and the Muslim world, is the concern that the attention she has received is privileged and it overshadows other victims and problems (Crilly 2013; Masood and Walsh 2013; Olesen 2016). A quote found in Crilly (2013) echoes that view:

“Why, many people wonder, has the young campaigner – and two other friends caught up in the shooting – been allowed into the UK [with] visas when hundreds of other people are maimed or killed by terrorists each year? Mustafa Shah, a teacher at the Degree College Swat, said: ‘All the three girls have gone for free education but what about thousands others who are at still at the sharp end, travelling to and from school every day?’...”

Masood and Walsh’s (2013) article similarly highlight this double standard by illustrating the largely unknown case of Atiya Arshad, an 11-year-old girl who was also shot by Taliban militants in a poor neighborhood of Karachi. While lining up to receive an academic award, she was shot twice in the stomach. The article discusses another 11-year-old girl (unnamed) who died. Her father, a flour mill worker, complained of the difference in treatment for his daughter versus Malala’s. No politicians or campaigners on the local or global scale had rushed to assist his daughter after she was shot and noted that, “We are arranging her treatment with great difficulty.”

Olesen (2016) also argues that there are those that think Malala cast Pakistan and Islam in a negative and stereotypical manner in a global platform, an image that perpetuates Orientalism and of the idea that both Pakistan and Islam require military as well as ideological intervention in order to save them from themselves. According to Masood and Walsh (2013), some critics accused Malala’s father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, of using his young daughter for publicity reasons and for the

purpose of slandering Pashtun culture. As her father is the founder of a school for girls, he is accused of servicing his own livelihood by advocating for girls' education.

But in actuality, a careful reading of the book reveals that its contents and the version of the story told in it, can be read as going beyond the binary of victim or traitor. Several academic articles advocate for a more cognizant way of reading and analyzing *I am Malala* (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Ryder 2015; Fitzpatrick 2017; Sadaf 2017). While the authors generally put forward the suggestion that Malala has been taken up and exploited by the West as a symbol, they agree that a more nuanced reading that moves beyond what dictates global narratives of power is key to understanding the text.

In *I am Malala*, we are greeted with vibrant cultures, many strong female characters, as well as kind and loving men. Through the text, we learn about the Pashtun culture and hospitality, their proclivity for poetry, their thirst for knowledge, as well as the beauty of the mountains peppered with old Buddhist artifacts. The religion of Islam can also be seen through narratives such as this as a source for generosity and peace (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013: 172):

“Our friend Shiza and some of the activists we met in Islamabad came to Mingora and distributed lots of money. But just like during the earthquake, it was mainly volunteers from Islamic groups who were the first to arrive in the more remote and isolated areas with aid.”

These are all instances of women's enacting agency within the constraints of their lives, and these examples add complexity to, or even challenge, the women-in-Islam schema. Nevertheless, it would still be overly simplistic to brand these actions as women's complete agency and samples of empowerment that are unaffected by some structure of control and oppression. But, they do offer the possibility of differently constituted lives where women's agency may not emulate the ones envisioned by Western liberal feminists. This aligns with Abu-Lughod's (2013) argument that women may be operating under their local frameworks against domestic and global patriarchies in exercising their agency and rights.

2.1.3 The mascot within the politics of pity

The main contention gleaned from the text is the story of how Malala and her father's activism and political entanglements led to the shooting. The main issue does not seem to be girls' access to education, as UNESCO or the Malala Fund would have us believe. Rather, the text homes in on a radically specific event, which is the rise of the Taliban in the Swat Valley, their altercations with the Pakistani army, and their resistance to American military interventions in Afghanistan, and

finally Malala's and her father's vehement criticism through Western media, which lead them to mark girls' schooling as an issue that ultimately makes Malala a target. This event was however reduced to the reality for all Pakistani, Muslim, or global South girls. News titles like "Malala: The girl who was shot for going to school" (Husain 2013) echoes such a sentiment. But careful reading reveals that girls like Malala had access to schooling all along and was only hindered by a particular radicalized Taliban group.

The complexity of the text which broadly covers the histories, political economies, urbanization, ethnic struggles, activism, and the dynamics of geopolitical conflict in the region deserves a more equally nuanced engagement beyond the way Malala's story has been circulating locally and globally. This is demonstrated through the mobilization for girl's education by various advocacy groups and awards given to Malala that frame Malala as the emblem of advocacy for girls' education. This erroneously depicts the assumption that girls in Pakistan have no 'freedom' and no access to schools and education in general. Ryder (2015) argues that Malala emphasized her identity as a Muslim woman with the ability to be vocal, while simultaneously noting that Islamization is not a religious movement but a political one. Therefore, even when Malala relied on Western media to propagate her message, her dominant messages that went beyond girls' education was persistently disrupted (Ryder 2015). Critics should therefore attempt to amplify these disruptions (Ryder 2015; Sadaf 2017).

In these stances, we see Malala Yousafzai being coopted by different groups: the media (such as BBC Urdu and The Times), her father, the Western consumer, and even the author collaborating with Malala Yousafzai. While the first two have been addressed by the authors I have cited above, I would like to address the last two: The Western consumer and her collaborator.

In addressing how Christina Lamb has also coopted Malala Yousafzai's story, we turn to "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective" by Mascia-Lee, Sharpe, and Cohen (1989). They addressed the issue of true collaboration with informants, as in asking them to select research problems, collect the data, or even participate in the analysis of the data. According to Mascia-Lee, Sharpe, and Cohen (1989):

"Our suspicion of the new ethnographer's desire for collaboration with the "other" stems not from any such refusal to enter into dialogue with that "other" but from our history and understanding of being appropriated and literally spoken for by the dominant, and from our consequent sympathetic identification with the subjects of anthropological study in this regard."

To this, Wolf (1992) would reply, "This is a hard position to argue against, even when the choices are not so stark. But it is also a hard proposition to implant

on a practical level. I have tried to imagine how I might have involved the women in my various research sites in designing a project that would both benefit them and interest them. The thought is numbing...The end result was to be praised more for the process than the product.”

Mascia-Lee et al (1989) would agree if we refer to how they show Judith Stacey pointing out that “the research product is ultimately that of the researcher, however modified or influenced by informants”, it also “places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer”. To this, I agree. There is an apparent power hierarchy between the white renowned British journalist (Christina Lamb) and the foreign “interlocutor” (Malala Yousafzai) she “collaborates” with. There is no equality here, in terms of how the narrative is presented. Even if there is any equality attempted here, it is superficial at best. However, there is no acknowledgement or recognition of this.

3. A movement: Summary of *Politics of Piety*

We now turn to an anthropological work where Muslim women are also set center stage. The book is an ethnography of the women’s mosque movement in Cairo during the mid-nineties and a critique of secular concepts involving agency in the post 9/11 arena, a period of time during which Islam was being utilized by liberal elites as the representation of the antithesis of reason, enlightenment and human liberation. Works with focus on Muslim women is also where feminist politics runs the danger of being reduced to a rhetorical display of Islam’s abuses. The author attempts to provide an alternative meaning of agency that goes beyond simply resisting the regimes of oppression. She first takes secular liberalism to task for failing to “problematize the universality of the desire...to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of Male domination” (Mahmood 2004: 10). She questions the prevalent presupposition ingrained within a liberal perception of “agency” that is restricted within a binary model of implementing and subverting norms (Mahmood 2004: 29). Instead, she argues and advocates for understanding an assertion of agency as an embodied ethical practice that outlines and defines and makes feasible certain ways of relating to people, things, and oneself (Mahmood 2004: 34). For example, Mahmood argues that conservative dressing is seen by many of the women who adopt it as part of a bodily means to cultivate virtue. They describe it as a choice that stems from their desire and struggle to be closer to God.

To frame her argument about agency, she begins by asking why large groups of women across the Muslim region would champion a movement that seems to violate their own interests and agenda, particularly at a time when these women appear to be privy to the most emancipatory possibilities available to them. Instead of appropriating or reinterpreting scripture and exegetical traditions to challenge

the discrimination against women, the women of the mosque movement eschew politics and prioritize the cultivation of an embodied practice of personal piety that seemingly aligns with the patriarchal logic of fundamentalist Islam. This women's movement is an informal teaching and discussion circle based in mosques peppered around Cairo in neighborhoods of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The movement is a response to their proliferating restlessness with Egypt's growing secularization and westernization. While she briefly discusses the intellectual history of the movement and its stance to the state, she focuses mainly on classroom discussions among students and teachers on their endeavor to practice piety.

3.1 Western ignorance of Muslim women's autonomy

3.1.1 The Politics of The Global Muslim Woman

Saba Mahmood's text is representative of a broader anthropological literature based on ethnography that has not been prioritizing the production of richly textured ethnographic accounts as well as 'thick descriptions' as championed by Geertz. Mahmood's (2004) ethnographic description of the urban Muslim woman in Cairo can be clearly seen as a counter-model to the model propagated by Western secular feminists despite her claim that 'Islamism and liberal secularity stand in a relationship of proximity and co-imbrication rather than of simple opposition' to one another (25). Her aim is to debunk Western secular feminism and Western secular liberalism by capitalizing on the notions of female agency and political action driven by urban Muslim Women in Cairo:

"The aim of this book, therefore, is more than ethnographic: its goal is to parochialize those assumptions (in reference to movements that are uncomfortable with 'Islamic social conservatism' and are prejudiced to Muslim societies especially since the events of 9/11)—about the constitutive relationship between action and embodiment, resistance and agency, self and authority—that inform our judgments about non-liberal movements such as the women's mosque movement" (Mahmood 2004: 38).

Mahmood's ethnographic stance represents the kind of stance that Ortner (1995) cautions against, which is for academic studies to engage in ethnographic refusal surrounding the subject of feminine resistance. In a review on Mahmood's work, Bangstad (2011) argues that the limitations inherent in conducting fieldwork within mosques are demonstrable in Mahmood's work, as one gets very little idea of the extent to which moral dispositions that are cultivated in the ritual sphere are reproduced by these Muslim women in other social settings. The author also notes that the social status and class positions of these pious Muslims and the extent to which these factors affect their ritual practice were not discussed fairly. She quotes

van der Veer's review of Mahmood's book: "Her focus on the micro-processes inside the mosque seem to prevent her from looking at the micro-practices outside the mosque...one wonders whether piety defines the entirety of these women's lives" (van der Veer 2008: 812).

Cooper (2008) also points out that Mahmood's analysis operates on repeating and validating the moral norms of her pious informants. This is obvious when she recounts the narrative of how a female informant made her upwardly mobile husband abandon his propensity for alcohol and X-rated films through appeal to religious arguments (Mahmood 2004: 174). The idea that the woman's appeal to religious arguments guaranteed her victory over her husband is based on the female interlocutor's narrative, and as readers, we were not privy to the husband's point of view on the same event. In Ahmad (2017), an ethnography about South Asian migrant women's conversion to Islam in Kuwait, the Islamic conversions of domestic workers are more than just the binary of liberal versus religiosity: it encompasses so much more, located sometimes in the mundanity of everyday life. And the setting behind this simple complexity is a connection between ethnonational belongings, occupation, and status in Kuwait. This is a good example that alludes to the importance of a more holistic investigation of the research participants, certainly one that exceeds the spatial parameters of just the mosque.

Additionally, Bayat (2007) notes that the Islamic prayer groups for women, which were the subject of Mahmood's study, were mainly attended by well-off Egyptian women. Bayat argues that these women may have turned to religion to improve their own personal autonomy, however, they are also responsible for reproducing patriarchal constraints that limits the possibility for agency for Muslim women who do not participate in these groups or women who subscribe to different ideologies. This is problematic when considering the importance of 'thickness' in ethnographies.

Ethnographic refusal can be characterized as the resistance to and 'refusal to know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist (or do not, as the case may be)' (Ortner, 1995: 188), in which a refusal of an ethnographic stance to 'producing understanding through richness, texture and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance' (Ortner, 1995: 174). Specifically, Mahmood has chosen not to write about anything that might highlight oppression, perhaps for fear of reflecting poorly on already marginalized individuals. According to Ortner, such a decision results in 'ethnographic thinness', which dehumanizes marginalized groups by ignoring their complexity. She argues that researchers tend to engage in 'refusals', sometimes unknowingly, as they are unwilling to discuss potentially problematic research findings.

Mahmood's stance indicates that she has engaged in essentialism in her efforts to confront the essentialism frequently ingrained in ethnographic projects

pertaining to Muslim women. In the effort to join ethnographers seeking to build on Abu-Lughod's (1991) attempts to engage in 'writing against culture', Mahmood joined several scholars who have called for the need to shift from dominant epistemic views and methodologies used in conventional ethnographic anthropology research (Abu-Lughod 1991; Lincoln and Gonzalez 2008; Narayan 2003; Takayama 2011) and re-conceptualize the ethnographic process to reimagine hierarchies of power particularly the traditional usage of culture in reference to the essentialist binary of Western against the Rest (Abu-Lughod 1991; Appardurai 2002; Takayama 2011). However, in critiquing feminist theory in Western contexts as applied to women living outside of these contexts such as Muslim women, Mahmood (2004) has also participated in the essentialism of the binary of the Rest against the West instead. It is not a new development in feminist anthropology for anthropologists to critique and recast the parameters of feminist thought in a Western context when considering women living beyond these contexts (Mohanty 1988; Moore 1988). The proliferation in attention to critically reinterpreting feminist from the developing world challenges the notion of a universal category of what a woman is and debunks the belief that there are underlying commonalities of experiences that all women share (Moore 1994).

This is particularly relevant in a contemporary global context where many westernized politicians or advocates have appropriated and contributed to feminist discourse to bolster arguments supporting brutalities of military interventionism in the 'Muslim world' (Abu-Lughod 2002). This line of thought is also used to characterize the Muslim Man (Ewing 2009) and the Muslim Woman (Moors and Salih 2009) within Western framework as the anti-Western and anti-ethical embodiments of supposed 'non-Western' values. The global iconicity of Malala Yousafzai is representative of such a framework (Sadaf 2017; Walters 2016). Moore (1994) predicts that these concepts of contrasts meant that it would potentially threaten the entire structure on which feminist politics is based upon. Butler (1995), a fellow feminist scholar similarly argued that the contrasts would mean that in its engagement with Third World feminisms, scholars may fall victim to being proponents of versions of feminism that are not beneficial to women's rights at all. This is because it might not respond to the women's own desires. Women may not subscribe to the Western idealization of what liberation is and not see it as liberation. Furthermore, we should also consider The Muslim Woman's freedom to practice one's religion.

Mahmood's (2004) book aligns with Butler and Moore's arguments in her efforts to debunk Western secular feminism and liberalism, but Bangstad (2011) argues that Mahmood may have used her ethnographic data as a template to censure the author's own society or related community. Sahlins (2000) highlights the intrinsic reductionism within anthropological critique that has its function in just that. He wrote, "It is as if other people [who we study] had constructed their lives

for our purposes, in an answer to racism, sexism, imperialism and the other evils of Western society . . . An acid bath of instrumentality, the procedure [ethnography] dissolves worlds of cultural diversity into the one indeterminate meaning” (Sahlins, 2000: 505).

What the ethnographic exploration of the women in the piety movement yields to Mahmood is the opportunity to question secularism. Secular feminism is based on the imaginaries of secular liberalism, on that is defined as ‘a way of life’ for Mahmood (2004: 191). However, Bangstad (2011) points out that the reductionist isomorphism between secularism and liberalism is a product of Mahmood herself. Mahmood’s polemical construction of secular liberalism is as monolithic and widely representative for its proponents as Islam is for Muslims and as a result is a messy conflation of secularism and liberalism. Connolly (1999) and Bilgrami (2004) both pointed out that neither is reducible or dependent on each other. This line of thought on secularism was however not explained (Gourgouris, 2008). Mahmood’s work utilizes ‘the resources of the Islamic tradition’ for the purpose of questioning ‘many of the liberal political categories and principles for the contradictions and problems they embody’ (Mahmood, 2004: 1). This resorts to using Islam as a way to put some distance from their own society has been repeatedly utilized in the canons of post structuralist thought and is central for Foucault (Afary & Anderson, 2006).

Mahmood’s way of answering the feminist dilemma raised by the mosque movement is to remove the idea of women’s agency from resistance to relations of domination and the resulting naturalization of freedom as social ideal or from the goals of progressive politics. Quoting the text, “This positing of women’s agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, are not simply analytical oversights on the part of feminist authors.” (Mahmood 2004: 10).

In other words, women have no need to resist their oppression as agency can be fully expressed by embodying ethical practice that transcends western liberal distinctions between public and private. While this is an admirable effort on Mahmood’s part, the framing of her argument has led her to set up an antimony of her own that eradicates a range of intricate historical struggles as well as alliances. Selim (2010) argues that Mahmood put readers in a difficult position of selecting between a western liberal feminism that is typically linked to imperial interventions or an Islamic women’s piety movement that, based on Mahmood herself, is apathetic toward confronting, but instead supports, their brand of patriarchal oppression.

The two extreme binaries are problematic as it does not capture what Geertz (1973) called “thickness”, which is to produce understanding through richness, texture, and detail, instead of parsimony and refinement. While not necessarily synonymous with exhaustiveness, thickness is later considered a partner of holism,

in which the idea that a subject is part of a highly integrated culture and that it is feasible to delineate an entire system or at the very least take stock the principles behind it. Furthermore, Marcus (1986) emphasizes the need for local ethnography to be contextualized within the global processes of the world system, which he argues should be at the heart of the ethnographic stance. Hence, Ortner (1995) argues that if we believe an ethnographic stance to be based heavily on a commitment to thickness, then ethnographic refusal involves a refusal of thickness, a failure of holism (which may take different forms).

In the book's epilogue, Mahmood closes with a reiteration of her opening stance: "This attempt at comprehension offers the slim hope that in this embattled and imperious climate...analysis as a mode of conversation, rather than mastery, can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making other lifeworlds extinct or provisional." I would like to instead suggest, along the same line as Selim (2010), that if we were to view this conversation from the United States to Egypt, the lifeworld that may end up becoming extinct or provisional could be feminism itself, a non-conforming, secular, anti-colonial brand of ideology. Such an outcome would not necessarily be unsupportive of the neo-liberal supporters against whose imperial pretensions Mahmood has described.

In an interview with Narmeen Shaikh, Mahmood argued that: "Recall here that some of the most heinous crimes committed against humanity—including the Holocaust—were under the rule and rubric of democracy. So when Muslim scholars unproblematically uphold 'liberal democracy' as the ideal to emulate, I am forced to ask: What form of democracy, for whom, and with what conceptions of the public good?" (Shaikh, 2007: 152).

But if framed in this manner, it would be problematic for not just Egypt or the Middle East, but women in general when general rights are thrown out simply because western liberal feminism is flawed. Instead, I argue for agency and rights to be understood contextually within a structured framework (which will be addressed in the next section) while still recognizing the basic human right accorded to all regardless.

4. Discussion: An intersectional voice

In scholarly literature with Muslim women as the key subjects of study, the stances are usually arranged across the spectrums - one that is sympathetic to women's lives within an Islamic society, and the other focuses on the thorough subjugation that Islam poses to women. While the scholarly works tend to avoid being on the extreme ends of both poles, their stances are however still within the spectrum of both poles.

More positive stances about Muslim women that are often portrayed by feminist Muslim scholars tend to be in the sympathetic camp that argues that the

religion is not inherently oppressive to women. They achieve that by placing emphasis on factors other than Islam as a determinant instead. For example, Moghadam (2004) who is of Iranian background emphasized on economic structure as the primary reason in women's employment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) instead of Islam. According to Hijab (1988), gender ideology is the key factor behind women's access to the public sphere and wage labor in the Arab world. She further argues that religion as a factor should be put aside as it is overstated. Similarly, Charrad (2011) compared women in three North African countries to argue that the women's sociopolitical participation and access to legal rights is attributed to the kinship systems inherent in the society instead of Islam. Sabagh, Nachtwey, and Tessler (1998) also argued against religion as an indicator in these women's lives in terms of fertility outcomes and desires. There are also scholars, like Mahmood (2004) and Abu-Lughod (1993), who attempt to dispute blanket negativity about women's experience by demonstrating ways that the women manage to circumvent their restrictive realities and successfully fulfil their desires or intents (Abu- Lughod 1991; 2013; Mahmood 2004; Wagner et al. 2012). For example, Shampa and Mazumdar (2002) shows how women go on to contract meaningful religious lives beyond the borders of domestic religion which they then argue serve to challenge the essentialist construction of the passive Muslim woman. Agency is then being touted as proof that Islam itself is not the reason for women's oppression within the Muslim world. In their quest to critique essentialism, some authors in this camp such as the one cited above fall into reductionism of the opposite end.

The other camp serves to present or satisfy the preconception about how the Muslim Woman is deprived of opportunities and favorable rights within their societies (Moghissi 1999; Shahidian 2003). These scholars also argue that Islam is the primary cause of women's second-class status within Islamic societies. Scholars in this camp argues that to be culturally sensitive and to exculpate Islam of any responsibility in women's oppression will support the forces within the religion that serves to exert power over women. Within this camp, secularism seems to be presented as the solution to the salvation of the Muslim Woman. This is also the camp where I argue that 'politics of pity' manifest.

In "*Images of the Muslim Woman and the Construction of Muslim Identity: the Essentialist Paradigm*," Elham (2016) argues that majority of postmodern discourse surrounding Muslim women and their veil falls under the "essentialist paradigm" where the group is being viewed through the lens of religion which eventually leads to the generalized construction of the Muslim Woman identity. She believes that the women's identities are homogenized, and context is being ignored. The veil is the identity, not the person underneath it. One of the features of this paradigm is that the individuals are being forced to adopt a collective and essential identity and culture. As a result of multiculturalism, the group is being

further isolated. Elham (2016) believes that this is a result of a political process with a policy of soft legal pluralism which is driven by White's guilt stemming from their imperial past. Therefore, the author presents 'context matters' as the solution to the problem. However, I argue that merely asking context to be taken into account is too ambiguous and does not provide a sufficient guideline as to how to reduce the reductionist paradigm regarding Muslim women.

In another article that tackles essentialism within the discussion of Muslim women, Wassef (2011) propose that we should work to avoid encompassing paradigms and overarching narratives which would lead to essentialism. She said, "*Interpretations and pre-interpretations should be as fluid as the identities they hope to explain and represent.*" While I agree with the notion presented, she offered no solution beyond asking us to "interpret fluidly".

In my opinion, the first step towards a fair and unbiased understanding of agency, rights, and oppression would be to move away from reductionist views. Instead, one could imagine that all these function on a continuum, based on the intersectionality of identities and the distance between groups/individuals. For the purpose of objectivity, depending on the individuals/groups that we compare in relation to, the position they hold would move along the continuum. Further, even if we fix the individuals and groups that we hold in relation to (for example, the author or ethnographer themselves), the position they hold are still subject to change based on the situation they are both in. Wolf (1992) describes how by being a 'foreigner' she started off with a lot more power but lost some of it even though she still retained the power associated with being a guest from a powerful country. Her observers soon became more aware of her dependency on them and the power dynamic shifted. This example demonstrates the fluidity of agency, rights, oppression, and power. For the purpose of facilitating discussion in this article, I will term the fluidity of power that moves along the axis according to situation and the object of comparison – "*power covolution*"¹. I take this a step further and argue that there should be an intersection between the intersectionality of identities and *power covolution*.

Famously attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the term intersectionality started as a conceptual tool to showcase the weakness of a single-axis framework for the purpose of illustrating black women's lived experiences. As such, the development of intersectionality was borne out of the inability of feminist and anti-racist discourse at the time to describe the unique discriminatory experiences faced by black women. This is because the tools mentioned were not able to marry the

¹ In functional analysis, 'convolution' is a mathematical operation on two functions that goes on to produce a third function to show how one's shape is transformed by the other. The term is in reference to the results and process of computing of the function (Dijk, 2013).

multiple grounds which come together to form an individual's identity. However, this paper would like to understand the experience of Muslim women to be grounded on the most imperial definition I have come across for intersectionality - Intersectionality positions itself ontologically between reductionist-based studies with a pointed focus on the generalized and particularized research so stringent in nature that it fails to contribute to theory (Hancock 2007). In fact, Hancock (2007) argues that intersectionality is part of other constructivist efforts in championing that reality is shaped historically and is socially constructed. While intersectionality may be the result of resistance against a deconstructionist tradition, it has flourished beyond a simple rebuttal lodged in feminist studies. From this theoretical root, it can be argued that intersectionality has grown into a landscape in which many categories of differences interact with additional identification of the overarching ideas and culture, the social structure, the political terrain, and interactions between individuals. While intersectionality is sometimes believed to be only relevant to oppressed groups (Alexander-Floyd 2012), I align with other authors that believe in intersectionality's potential to assist in the understanding of relationship of dominance to subordination as well (Sherwood 2010; Madfis 2014; Sarah & Hughes 2018; Norocel et al. 2018). I am careful to caution that while intersectionality is in itself a reaction to essentialism, we must be careful not to essentialize the group as a result of a single intersectional combination. We must instead recognize that different women occupy a different position and would shift across the continuum depending on who they are being compared to or are being seen in relation to. With that in mind, a combination of intersectionality and *power convolution* would help present a more accurate representation of the diversity within Muslim women. An explicit recognition of them should also be present in literature, both for academic and public consumption, to avoid readers from cooptation that betrays the voice of these unique individuals.

5. Conclusion

Through the reflection of the poetics employed, the reaction, intention, and content of popular books with a far outreach in differing genres, the paper serves to showcase a physical manifestation of essentialism still entrenched despite the criticism of consistent essentialism within the field

Those that choose to represent Muslim women should take the group to be non-homogenous and apply the intersectionality lens to analyze them, while simultaneously taking the fluidity of power that moves along the axis according to situation and the object of comparison, *power convolution*, into consideration. A combination of *power convolution* and intersectionality of the individual/group we choose to represent would be a step toward the direction of moving away from the essentialism that is still permeating key writings today. The recognition that a 'group' is an evolving series where membership is unstable and dependent on the

factors laid out above is also another idea I hope to cultivate in the field of studies with Muslim women as the focus through this paradigm.

However, I would like to emphasize that profiling is not necessarily negative in its entirety. Phillips (2010) in her paper about essentialism argues that while essentialism is not a favorable and fair stance, unreflective critique of essentialism is problematic as well. In both denial and exaggeration of differences, comes a cost. She cited the example that through arguing for cultural equality based on the idea that people are similar would imply that there is no cost to being expected to align one's cultural practice with the principal group. She argues that acknowledging difference, or even profiling, is not necessarily essentialist as in the case of police work (Lippert-Rasmussen 2006). In fact, targeting information and resources would be more effectively undertaken for policy purposes. Generalization is then a matter of degree.

According to Narayan (1998), she argues that “antiessentialism about gender and about culture does not entail a simple-minded opposition to all generalizations, but entails instead a commitment to examine both their empirical accuracy and their political utility or risk”.

Therefore, my argument against essentialism within the confines of this article is not a simple opposition to all generalizations, but is instead rooted in the effort to study empirical accuracy. Therefore, a combination of power convolution and intersectionality helps cast our interlocutors within a continuum instead of a categorical embargo. I do not claim to completely eradicate essentialism with this formula, but to prevent embargo, and to provide a solution to begin to have a more fluid idea of what belonging to a group means. In the effort to dismantle groups, Phillips (2010) show that groups are being reinforced in the process. Through my proposed solution, groups could be recognized as something transient, a series that is constantly moving on a continuum. People therefore belong to different groups, and change groups depending on the power convolution and intersectionality of their circumstances.

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